

Sermon for 6 September 2020 – The Rev Faye Davenport

In many ways I feel very privileged. In fact, we are all very privileged. That is privileged to be part of a faith community. A community where we are loved, cared for and supported. Haven't the events of this year really proved that? We are loved and supported for who we are. That is warts and all. We don't need to pretend to be someone else. We are not judged by others. When our world is falling apart or falling down around us, or we are in a tough place we have the love of God through our faith community. Indeed we live in community. The readings this morning remind us that we have roles and responsibilities as a member of that community. How we are expected to behave and how we are to respond and react to others. We are reminded that we are responsible for ourselves as well as for others.

Last weekend I was one of several who attended the workshop led by Stuart where we explored the Christian faith and views on the End of Life Choice Act before the Referendum in October. This not only helps us make the most informed decision. It also assists us to have those conversations with others, our family and friends. Whether they profess a faith or not it is important to be informed by robust information rather than 'fake news'. We are responsible for ourselves and informing others.

As I reflected on the readings I wondered how the disciples engaged in their faith community in their times? Did they look out for each other? Did they have each other's back? How did they get on as a community?

In Romans chapter 13 we are called to clothe ourselves with Jesus Christ. Just as we get dressed each day physically, we are also called to clothe ourselves spiritually. Putting on the Character of Jesus and just what it means to clothe ourselves with Christ. By examining each virtue listed in Colossians 3, we discover that in the wardrobe of God through Christ, we can put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love. God has a wardrobe picked out just for each of us.

St. Paul points out that all obligations are summed up in that single commandment: love your neighbour as yourself. We say that every Sunday. At times we see this command to love as a single command but Paul in 1 Cor 13 brings out the complex nature of love.

This reading is very familiar to us. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not arrogant. Love is not irritable. Love is not boastful. Love is not resentful. Love does not rejoice in what is wrong. This is much more than a tick box exercise. Love rejoices in the truth. Actions speak louder than words. We are not alone in this, it is bigger than our faith community.

Jesus is Emmanuel, "God is with us". He is with us in our Church community. His message is one of reconciliation. We are asked to "regain" our brother or sister. "Regaining" is more than stopping someone's troubling behaviour, it is creating a change in that person, a change from within to the outside if you like – bringing about a true change in attitude. Jesus' openness to sinners depends on a change of heart and a change in behaviour: "Go, and sin no more". Ezekiel chapter 33 says we are expected to actively talk to the troubled person out of their ways and if we do not, we too are responsible, we too are accountable. That is a big and strong call to action. Even though we know, we are again reminded that we are not alone in this.

In Matthew chapter 18 this morning we are reminded that when we approach God in community, even a community of two or three, he is already there with us. The role of dialogue is emphasised which is another way of saying that we should at all times seek consensus. This may be a 'big ask': it accepts that this is not always possible and the consequences are clear.

Jesus is gently reminding us that by being members of the church community, we are responsible for one another, and one of our tasks of love may be that of correcting our brother or sister who makes a mistake or behaves badly. It is not about rejecting them but assisting them on to the right path, even in a loving and forgiving way.

Because Jesus shares his own spirit with us, the connection between the community of believers and Jesus is very close: what we bind or loose here is bound or loosed in heaven, and whatever we ask in union will be given to us by the Father.

The reading today speaks of the mechanism the early Christians developed in order to deal with internal conflicts and with members who make a mistake or behave badly. As we re-read these words, we become aware of our responsibilities to our brothers and sisters in the community. What do we do when we notice others losing their way: do we simply shrug our shoulders, do we call them out publicly on social media, do we feel morally superior? Or do we follow the gentle way traced by Jesus, trying to win back our sister or brother? We pray for someone we know who is straying from the right path. we pray for ourselves to feel responsible for our brothers and sisters in this community of believers.

To what extent do we feel responsible for the wrongdoings of our fellow-Christians? To what extent do we realise that our behaviour both as individuals and groups reflects on the overall witness that the Church is called to give.

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them”. Let us pray today for a greater awareness and understanding of these words of Jesus. Let us pray for eyes to see and ears to hear Jesus among us.

Jesus assures us he is present when people are gathered in his name. We pray in gratitude for those who join us in the name of Jesus, and who make him present in our life and our world. This year the need has never been greater, particularly as so many people struggle finding themselves in a totally new way of being and living.

Lord, this is your way of stopping tell-tales in the church. We are reminded in the reading that if we are upset about someone, then the first person for us to approach is that person, with respect and kindness, whether it is a family member or colleague, a parish priest or lay member. So many people start by running to authority, expecting those of that higher level to come down with a stick. People write letters of complaint to officials without having voiced their complaint to the one they are judging. That is the opposite of Christian behaviour.

Whatever we do when we are upset, Lord, let us do it in charity.

The presence of Jesus in the community is highlighted in these gospel words. In caring and challenging the offending member, in gathering together in his name, the Lord is present. One of the first words of the gospel was 'Emmanuel' - God is with us. The end of the gospel has Jesus' promise of being with us every and all days. In a church which may overemphasise the sacramental presence of the Lord, it is good to remind ourselves of the presence of Jesus among us all the time, in the heart and hearts of his people.

In many ways, we are keepers of our sisters and brothers. We have social responsibility in family, circle of friends and in our neighbourhood. Jesus is saying something like that today. We have a responsibility for each other, for the common good. We teach by example and by love. Even when children are young and making some mistakes, we hope they are not mistakes that last forever, like crime, alcoholism or an unplanned life-changing moment. We pray to God for his assistance and guidance. This we do with others. We ask for guidance and find help in the community of the church and of others. That's where God is - two or three gathered is the community of God. Church is the gathered people. God wants the best for each of us. We can help each other toward good-ness, we can support each other, correct each other, and help each other on our way to God.

Jesus promises guidance and his presence to his followers for all ages. If we gather in his name, he is with us. The 'in his name' is the relevant condition. That means openness to his word and the traditions faithfully handed on by his community of followers. It means openness to asking for wisdom and guidance and the humility to admit none of us has all the answers.

Jesus promises his continuing presence. Even as we pray alone, we are united with others who pray at this time, with all of those who read this gospel today, with those who use this Sacred Place right now. We grow in awareness that Jesus wants to be present to us, is present to us, loves us and calls us to life.

We let our ideas of justice and fairness be worked on by Jesus' words. We resist engaging in an intellectual evaluation or a legal argument, and let Jesus' desire for harmony speak to our hearts.

We consider the effects of living in a culture that promotes gossip, scandal and the telling of tales. We pray that God's Spirit may lead us to right judgment.

How do we take the first step to heal a broken relationship, if the hurt done to us is very painful? Where can we find the courage to speak face to face with the one who has caused such hurt? How do we become reconciled? We may need to seek the help and prayer of our family and friends, so that we will find the right words and the right way to settle our differences

Jesus you tell us that where two or three are gathered in your name you are there with us, Let us trust and believe in what you say and seek your wisdom in resolving difficult situations. May we see and genuinely believe in the giftedness of those who hurt us. They too are the beloved of God!

AMEN